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Alistair Macleod - b. 1936

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interview led by Linda Collinge, and Jacques Sohier, Conference on "The Implicit, in the Short Story in English", December 7, 2002, Published in *JSSE* n°41, 2003

1 Born in Canada and raised in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Alistair MacLeod chooses the harsh landscape of Cape Breton as a setting for most of his stories. In so doing, he pays homage to the labouring inhabitants of the island, mostly miners and fishermen and their families, but also raises questions about how individual destinies are formed in the web of strong family ties and tradition. His short stories were collected into two volumes, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, published in 1976, and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, published in 1986. They have been recently republished with new stories as *Island, The Complete Stories* (2000). Alistair MacLeod has also published a novel, *No Great Mischief* (1999).

Linda COLLINGE: Can you tell us when you first knew that you would be a writer?

Alistair MACLEOD: No. I always liked to read and I always liked to write and I always could do that type of thing. Well, I was always interested in literature. I think while I was growing up, I was like someone who had musical ability or athletic ability, who can do certain things, but I never thought I was going to spend my life as a singer, or playing basket-ball although I could catch the ball and carry a tune, and I never thought I would make my living as a writer and I did make my living as a writer and that was a good thing.

Then what happened? I was the kind of person who won the prize in high school for the best story or the best essay. But then, one thing happened that led to two things: I went to study for a PhD in English and that can be kind of soul-destroying. It is hard to be dazzlingly imaginative and get a PhD in English or in anything else, because you have to jump all the hoops. You study for the French exam and you pass, you study for the Latin exam and you pass, you study for the German exam and you pass, then you study for

the comprehensives and you pass, you present a thesis proposal, etc. But one of the things you do is that you certainly analyse literature a lot, you certainly read a lot of short stories, lots of novels and so on. So somewhere along the line, I said, "Well, maybe instead of analysing James Joyce's 'The Dead' for the 95000th time, or 'A Rose for Emily', I should try and write one myself. So I decided to do that and I did and it was fine.

The other thing that happened was I was six years in the US and I was away from what I considered to be my home landscape. I don't know if it is absence that makes the heart grow fonder, but when I was far removed from my home landscape, I began to think of it, more thoughtfully I think than if I had remained in it, and I began to say "Well, if I am going to set fiction somewhere, why not set it here, why not?" So I did that, and it has been successful. You see I was kind of old when I began to do this, about say twenty-seven...

LC: Could you tell us what the first story was that you imagined?

AM: No, I don't think so. Probably the first two short stories I had published: a short story called "The Return" and a short story called "The Boat". "The Boat" was originally published in *TheMassachusetts Review* and then it was picked up in *Best American Short Stories of 1969*, so that's a long time ago. But the people in there were Joyce Carol Oates, Sylvia Plath, who had a posthumous story in there... It was good from the start although it was kind of a late start. It has not been a prolific life, but everything that I have done has been well received. I never got a rejection slip in my life, but I think part of that is because I thought a lot about it. I said "I want to do this, I want to do that." So I guess I have been lucky, or slow, both.

Martin SCOFIELD: I want to ask about the short story. You have written a novel, but your main focus and your main writing has been in the short story. Why the short story?

AM: I think I like the compression of it, the intensity of it and that you can deal with one or two ideas. I like to write with a kind of intensity. In track and field terms, I think of it as a 100 yard-dash, whereas I think of a novel as a marathon! When I began to write the novel, I was not sure whether I could maintain that intensity for 300 pages. That's why I like the short stories.

Peter MULLER: Could you tell us a bit more why you have eventually changed and moved to this new genre, the novel. Was it because it has been a challenge that you needed to deal with eventually, or was it something that had to do with the material that you didn't find the shorter form sufficient for, or what was the reason?

AM: I think it's more or so the latter. The story that I read from – 'Island' – is 40 pages long and I have another one 'Vision', which is about 40 pages long and it seemed they were getting longer and longer. They were getting to be novella-like it seemed to me, because I had more to say or thought I did. So, it just seemed like I needed a bigger canvas or I needed a bus instead of a Volkswagen! I needed more space to put my people in, so that they could do more things. I had a lot of clothes and only had a small suitcase, so I said, "I'll get a bigger suitcase to put all this in, so I can package these people and what they are going to do". I spent most of my life teaching at university and that is a lot of work, so very often I would just do the novel in the summer. I would do a little bit, put it away, and then begin the next summer. So the novel went on too long. If I had been working on short stories, I would probably have another number of short stories. But it was the material.

Vasiliki FACHARD: Whom do you address, who is your ideal reader?

AM: I don't have any ideal reader. I think that one great thing about being a creative writer or an imaginative writer is that you can just do anything you want, and then hope for the best and it will always come along. Most people who write, not creative or imaginative writers, have things imposed upon them. They have dead lines they have got to meet, they have limitations of length. They have to tell the truth, which you don't have to do in fiction at all. I just say: "Just do the best I can and then, I will send it out, and it will find a home". And it is not like writing situation comedies for TV, only half an hour long with a laugh every three minutes. You can do anything you want. I don't say: "Well, this is aimed at middle-aged women in Algeria!" *Island* has been translated into fourteen languages. And I love that because I think of writing as a communicative act. My work has always been popular in mainland Europe: in France, Italy and Germany. But I was surprised a little bit when the Israelis bought the work, or when the Japanese bought the work, when the Albanians bought the work, or when the Turks bought the work. That is a long way to answer your question but when I was writing in Cape Breton, I was never saying, "I bet the Turks will like this"!I was just saying "I am just going to do the best I can".

Jacques SOHIER: I like the way you describe the work of dentists in "The Closing Down of Summer". You say that there are "limited possibilities to be found in other people's mouths." Would you say that when you write, you experience unlimited possibilities?

AM: Yes; I don't know very well about dentists, although I know a lot more about them since I did all this research. I got to read their magazines and that is quite a lot of fun. Well, I just think of limited possibilities to be found in 32 teeth, although dentists become richer than most writers...

JS: You are very ironical with the professionals, dentists, lawyers...

AM: Well, I don't know if I'm ironic, I am interested in a lot of this work, with how people spend their time living their lives. A lot of people spend their time living their lives with their bodies, and a lot of people spend their time sitting at a desk all day or peering into people's mouth. But yes, I think, as a writer, you can just soar beyond the 32 teeth in a person's mouth. You can do their ears and their eyes and their hair: it is all there!

Héliane VENTURA: But in your novel No Great Mischief, you also choose for the last Alexander the profession of dentist. So, you must have a fascination for dentists...

AM: I chose in the novel the profession of the orthodontist, and the orthodontist is a fancy dentist. What I liked about that is that it's a very new profession. Forty years ago, there was no such person as the orthodontist. There were primitive dentists. But orthodontists, in North America, are about the richest people that there are. And they get rich by looking after the teeth of the rich. Poor people never go to the orthodontist, they never do. In my novel, I just wanted to make this young man a rich young man, so he becomes a rich young man. The other thing I liked about the orthodontist's job is that you change people's outsides and you give them nice smiles but inside they can still be rats, rats with nice smiles. So, I was interested in that idea of cosmetic work where you change people's externals but inside they are still the same.

JS: We observe several references to other writers in 'The Boat' for instance when you mention Mickey Spillane, Ernest Haycox, Faulkner, Dostoyevsky and Manley Hopkins. Would you say you admire those writers? Or have they inspired you in any way?

AM: No. That section in 'The Boat' is about an older man who likes to read and he just reads anything. You used to be able to get boxes of used books for not very much money and so these boxes just come and what you get in the boxes is very uneven. You get classics – like maybe Gerard Manley Hopkins –, Mickey Spillane, that kind of detective book, or westerns or *How to Build a Better Fruit Cake*! There would be all kinds of things in there and he just reads them all. It's like someone who does indiscriminate reading. Some of the books affect you more than others.

John CASSINI: Just a quick question about your childhood. Were you a voracious reader?

AM: No I do not think I was voracious, but I liked to read. But I wasn't under the bed reading by myself, or anything, no.

JC: Do you have a first remembrance of a passage, an author, a book, that really kind of grabbed you?

AM: No, I don't. But I really liked literature in school, so I just read whatever they gave me in grade ten and I kind of liked it all! I liked Macbeth and I liked Wordsworth and I liked whatever came along. I was like the guy reading the indiscriminate box of books!

Corinne DALE: I noticed in your stories almost a motif having to do with vision: eyes, damaged eyes, blindness, second sight, references to Gaelic stories about those things and I even wondered if the environment that your stories are set in might be a particularly harsh environment for vision, I don't know. But I just wondered if you would talk about that constellation of images having to do with vision…

AM: As 'Island' was my story about isolation, 'Vision' was my story about vision. So I just put everything in there I could think of about sight, about literal sight: people who can see certain things and people who can't see certain things, you have the colour blind test for your driver's licence at some places; and people who can see the future, like second sight, like what happens when you go to the fortune-teller, or people who can see the past very clearly, people who remember the past. People who are literally blind, who can't see anything literally but can see in other ways. People who can see things but are too stupid to see what they do see. Like in families, someone is neglecting the middle child and you say "Do you ever notice that you pay all your attention to your oldest daughter and your youngest daughter?", "Oh, I didn't see, I can't see that".

So 'Vision' is a long complicated story with all those people in it who can see things and can't see things. And the other kind of image I had in this story was... it is about – what will I say – illegitimacy. Sometimes people are seeing people and they don't know that these people are their grandparents because they were raised in the house down the road. So they are seeing people and they think of them as Neighbour Brown and then later they see the truth or someone reveals to them the truth, that Neighbour Brown is really their grandmother. So I was interested in all those possibilities of what we see and what we don't see, about people who want to see things, people who don't want to see things.

I don't know about the geography affecting your eyes, but maybe it does for people who are in the Arctic a lot, they suffer from snow-blindness. People get sand in their eyes a lot and people who work in certain professions, as I said before, or work in physical professions, they lose their eyes, they lose other parts of themselves, they lose their hands, they lose their feet because of the nature of their work.

John PAINE: I was reading 'Clearances', which is the last and I guess the most recent story that you have published. It is one of those long short stories that you were describing earlier, with 30 to 40 pages. It put me in mind of a number of Southern short story writers, particularly a writer from my state of Tennessee, especially the sense of vague longing, a kind of nostalgia, perhaps a sense of loss, the elegiac tone that has been ascribed to you in book-jacket copy. I wonder if you, as a short story writer, consider as your peers people like Peter Taylor, Eudora Welty…

AM: Well, I think people from the South, and this is obviously speaking in clichés, have been in their landscape for a long long time, as a lot of these people that I write about have been. And I think if you are from a landscape that goes back, this may not be very long in terms of a country like France, but goes back for centuries, and if you have a relationship with the land and you are able to say, rightly or wrongly, this is my parents' land and my grandparents' land and my great grandparents' land and my great great grandparents' land... People who have been in the same place for a long time very often have an attachment to that place, which is different from people, say, in Chicago, who buy a house for $80 000 and then get to a higher level of income and buy a house for $120 000 and just keep moving from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, based on what they can afford to pay. And that is very different than being on these old farms or places. I think because people have been in the South longer than many of the people have been in...Southern California perhaps, they have a little different attachment to certain things.

RM: I guess this is more of a personal question. I am from Inverness County, MargareeValley…

AM: Oh, what is your name?

RM: My name is Rodney Macdonald.

AM: Oh my gosh, you are probably my cousin!

RM: I relate to what you said where being away you really see more into where you are from. I have only been in France for two months but that is as true as it can possibly be. I don't understand where you started to be able to write the lives and the personalities of the people where we are from, because I have a deep longing within me to know these people and know where I come from. When you read 'Island', I was thinking 'my grand father has a lobster fishing shanty on a wharf, right on the shore where we sat growing up', but at the same time, I feel like I don't have this deep connection with the people who produced me. When and where did you start to really get this insight? How did you write these personalities?

AM: I don't know but as I said earlier, I think when I began to read all these short stories that you read, then I began to think "well the place that I come from is as interesting as any of these places, why not?" Rural Mississippi is not the centre of the universe, or D.H Lawrence up there in the north of England is not the centre of the universe, Thomas Hardy down in the south of England, these people are not the centre of the universe. But their stories have become kind of the centres of the universe. So why not do it? I never wrote about any of my own family, I don't like to do that, I think it is a limitation of the imagination to say "I am just going to write about my aunt's clothesline!" But I began to think about those things you are talking about. There is a theory that people write about what worries them. That people worry about different things depending on the geography that they come from, that Canadians worry a lot about snow, because they are in it a lot and winter will kill them; and last week I was in Mexico and nobody in Mexico worries about snow, they don't worry about winter

because it will never kill them, but other things will kill them. And I think all of these people worry about their children or they worry about love. There are kind of universal concerns up here and then, there are specific concerns down here that come very often from your geography, from your religion, colour of your skin, there are all kinds of things that are specific. So I began to think about that and I began to say "Well, I am going to deal with a character, this is her concern, or this is his concern and I want to structure it in a certain way, so that these specific concerns become universal concerns". And this is hard work to be effective because you want people to be moved by your story.

Question: Hello, (Gaelic greeting)

AM: Where are *you* from?

Q: I am from mainland Nova Scotia but I studied at the Gaelic college. I can't tell you how much I relate to your work and I thank you for making it, for writing it. I read on the poster that you fished and you've mined and you worked in woods to put yourself through school. I can tell by reading your work that you have been there, you have been to that place as in the real thing, the real Cape Breton or East coast sort of life-style. You are teaching English in Ontario during the year, you are doing lots of things in your life… Did you ever feel like you had one foot in one world and one foot in another world?

AM: All the time.

Q: All the time, this is how we feel. Do you think it is there, or is it in here? Is it inside or is it outside? How do you feel about your identity as for example a Cape Bretoner?

AM: I do not know what you mean by inside or outside, what do you mean?

Q: This landscape.

AM: I carry it with me all the time, inside. That landscape is with me all the time. I think that's just memory. Lots of people find their bodies and their physicality in places where they don't necessarily, emotionally want to be, but they have to be there for economic reasons. Nearly 12 million refugees are on the move all the time. Why are they on the move? They are on the move because they are starving or they are looking for a better economic life. But if you go wherever refugees are, they are always playing the music of their homeland which sustains them emotionally while they are physically in some place where they're cleaning the toilets, where they are doing work that doesn't do much for their souls. So I think this is a common idea. I think people carry things within them that are what they are truly, but sometimes can't express because of certain things.

Laurent LEPALUDIER: When reading 'The Closing Down of Summer' and other stories, I found that both the fishing and the mining communities had some place in your short stories. In 'The Closing Down of Summer' there is this narrative in the first person in the plural, 'we', which gives a very high sense of belonging to a community and it seemed to me, when reading it, that there was also a nostalgic sense for a lost community or a dwindling community, something that was going to disappear. Is that right?

AM: Yes I think so. I think in 'The Closing Down of Summer', you have those men who are contract-miners who move all around the world and the man who speaks, speaks from the 'we' position. I see him as the captain of an athletic team, a football team and they say to him "what are your plans for Saturday?" and he never says 'my plan is', he says, "we want to shut down the defence, or we want to score early". He is the spokesperson for a group of people who are doing the same thing.

And the other thing I was interested in there is sometimes parents give their children advice and the cliché is that the children rebel against the parents. But very often they don't, they just do what the parents tell them. So these are people who work with their hands, men who work with their hands, because this is an all-male world that they are in, and then they say to their children "Don't do what I do, go and be a dentist, go and be a lawyer, go and be something where it will be physically easier and you'll make money" and very often these children say 'OK'. And they go off and learn all kinds of arcane things, they go and become English professors or something, and then when they come back to talk to the father twenty years later, they have nothing in common. So by encouraging them to do something different, they have lost them. It is a kind of ironic situation.

I was also interested in the idea that a lot of people make their living by talking, and then there are other people in the world that hardly ever say anything. But it doesn't mean that their thoughts are not as valuable as those of us who talk a lot. If you listen to those of us who talk a lot, you realise this, and they realise this. There used to be a sports commentator in the United States named Howard Cossel. He would interview the athletes and say "When you're running to the basket, what's going through your mind?" And very often the guy would say "I just shoot the ball". I thought this was an interesting contrast between tremendously good physical men who did not talk and the sedentary Howard Cossel who couldn't do any of those things but could really talk.

LC: Do you think the relative absence of dialogue in the stories might be explained through that?

AM: I think so. I think that a lot of people talk and a lot of people don't talk. And sometimes, occupations dictate whether you can talk or not. Men in fishing boats never talk all day because they can't hear one another. The waves are shroshing over, they just work and they never speak or they make signs because they can't hear one another above the wind and the waves. But their brothers who work in the fish plants stand all day cutting the fish, and they talk all the time! Their occupation leads them to be able to talk or not to be able to talk.

So that's the thing about the dialogue, a lot of people in the stories don't speak very much. This has been a problem with the filming. They are always going to make films and I say "You'd better watch out before you make your film – I think people get carried away by the story – because there is not much talking in those stories."

LC: I noticed that in your stories there was an interesting contrast between the implicit and the explicit around the theme of death for example. For example in stories like 'The Boat' that ends with the description of the father that's been killed at sea and in 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun' where the character is maimed by the dog, there are very vivid descriptions of death. On the contrary in some other stories like 'The Road to Rankin's Point', death always remains only suggested, it's never completely revealed, it remains completely implicit. The same is true for example in the story 'In the Fall' where we suppose that the horse is going to be killed and the child has understood that the horse is going to be killed but it's never really mentioned. So my question is: how would you explain the very strong contrast between the very, very vivid description and practically the unsaid as if it were too painful to say.

AM: Sometimes you intuit things without really knowing them in a rational sense and this will depend on what you are like. And sometimes there are things like suicides. There is a lot written about suicides and the guilt the people left behind sometimes feel, because they say "Oh, if I had known he was going to do that, I would have done

something else". When people die in mysterious ways, sometimes there are signs and signals when you play things back; there was a kind of implicit something that was happening that you didn't see. If somebody is blown apart in an explosion or something like that, completely accidental, then you know how the person left, but these other issues sometimes you don't know and there is a lot of implicit, especially among people who don't talk a lot.

LC: Some descriptions of death are very vivid, as if they're almost an expression of the unacceptability of death. And that seems to be somewhat in contradiction with the idea of belonging to a community and passing on life from one generation to the next. In that case death is not unacceptable, death is just part of life.

AM: People who work with their bodies, as a lot of these people do, who work outside, do get kicked by horses, do get blown up in mines, do get washed overboard. You die in a very visual way which is unlike slipping into death in a hospital bed with lots of shots of morphine so you won't feel death. So I think that is part of that. You can be positive about life and pass it on to the generations and still die. This is what happens.

JS: You have taught creative writing classes. How do you go about teaching these classes?

AM: Well, you can't give people ability. You can't give people imagination any more than you can give people musical ability or athletic ability. You can't give them what they haven't got. But having said that, if you get somebody with athletic ability or with musical ability, you can make them better. Musical people who can read music are better off than musical people who can't read music, because they have another dimension to them. People with athletic ability who come under the influence of a good coach will be better.

You can never give students subjects, I don't think, because I believe that art comes from the heart, from the emotion, from what you care about, and you can care about anything, because individuals care about different things. Then you say "Well, now this is what you care about. If we are going to make this into fiction, we have to do something with this. Tell the story from the point of view of the mother, tell the story from the point of view of the daughter, tell the story from the point of view of the old man next door". These are all things that can be taught, techniques that you can apply to people with talent, but you can't give them the talent. We all know this. So can you teach creative writing? Well I just think of it as "Can you teach the piano?" you say "Sure, teach piano, some people will be better than others."

JS: And in return, have those classes had an impact on your writing?

AM: Not very much because I think writing is so very individual.

LC: How do you choose a title for a short story?

AM: I like the stories to have nice rolling titles. And sometimes I have them and sometimes I don't. I think that sometimes titles are better than the stories! A title that I really really liked is by a Southern writer Carson McCullers who had a novel called *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and I just think this is such a lovely title, or *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* by Alan Sillitoe. They are just beautiful titles. Some of my titles are 'The Boat' (hum), 'The Return' (hum), 'Vision' is a little better, these are kind of monosyllabic little titles. Then I had a title 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood' which I really liked and which was the title of the first collection of short stories that I brought out. The publishers did not want that title because they said it was awkward and hard to remember. They said if people have a hard time remembering it, it will not sell as well.

It sold very well, so they were wrong on that. But I encounter people and they say "I read your book 'Bloody Old Salts', 'Salty Old Gift', the book with 'blood' in the title and 'salt' in it", and I say "Oh, yes. Good that you read it". So it is kind of clunky in the mouth! And a lot of people think it is from the Bible, but it is just from me!

And then, when I brought out my second collection, 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun', the publisher said "I suppose you want this title?", "Yes" I said. But I had beaten them down by that time, so they let me do almost anything I wanted. So I think 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood' has all kinds of reverberations in it in terms of the story and of the collection and I think 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun' has all kinds of reverberations within the story. What I was interested in 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun' was cause and effect, and primitive people and a lot of critics of that story think that birds sing in the morning before the sun comes out and I never thought of that at all myself. What I was thinking of is, in places like Canada, when spring comes after the winter, some people – I am imagining these people – say "Oh, spring is coming. Pretty soon the birds will come." Or other people look for the first robin, the first bird and they say "Oh, the birds are here, that means the spring is coming", like the birds will bring the sun with them, which of course they don't, but it is an idea. So I like those kinds of titles because I think you are able to do work in the title as well as in the story. Whereas with 'The Boat', 'The Return' you are there with your little 'the' and your little noun and it doesn't reverberate as much as the others.

HV: About 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun', to me it sounds like an incomplete metaphor, because 'as birds bring forth the sun, so' and then, 'so' is missing. Is this the way you meant it, or is it 'when' birds bring forth the sun?

AM: Yes that's the way I meant it. Like in the novel, *No Great Mischief*, the original sentence was 'No Great Mischief if They Fall'.

HV: Can I return to 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun', the story itself, because it is certainly a fascinating story. There is a sense of doom that pervades the story. That is in contradiction with what you have said about survival and the fact that what you were trying to voice through the anxieties of the characters was the theme of survival.

AM: In that story, a lot of people are trying to survive. But in certain families, there may be certain things in your DNA or in your genetic make-up... Say, you are a woman and your mother died when she was forty and your grandmother died when she was forty and your great grand mother died when she was forty and your great great grandmother died when she was forty and suddenly you are 37 and you don't feel so well, "Well...", you say. Or else you say "Well, I don't believe in any of that, that's just coincidence, I feel fine." But I think once you have knowledge – and in that story there is a character that says "you cannot not know what you do know"– once you know things, they are yours until Alzheimer comes! You may say "I am not going to believe this, I am not going to think about this today, I am not going to think, I am not going to think...", but it is still there, and you can just push it back so far. I was interested in the idea of what we carry with us.

The other thing I was interested in was people with a belief, whatever that belief is. If they are inside the circle of the belief, that is reality, and people who are outside their circle of belief think of them as strange.

HV: But they believe in the evil spell, they feel that they are under a spell, and they cannot escape this spell. Is this something that you are particularly fascinated with?

AM: Kind of, yes. It is not as extreme but it is like people who believe in voodoo, or who believe that other people are capable of taking your souls...

Q: Do you ever read any criticism, literary criticism on your work, scholarly criticism?

AM: Sometimes.

Q: And does it effect you in any way?

AM: No. I don't think so. See it always comes after the work is out. And I think that you just have to do what you do. Anything you write excludes 99.9% of the world. I am not talking about serious literary criticism but people can always say "why don't you have more references to religion in your work, or more references to sex, or more references to vegetarians, or more references to Star Wars, or more references to rabbits?" I just say "Well, this is what I've got and this is what I do, I can't do everything, so here I am". But, yes I read literary criticism.

Q: What about your relationship with your translators?

AM: I don't know. All I can do is hope that the publishers put you in good hands. And I think because the publishers try to make the book as good as it can be, they generally do put you in good hands. But sometimes I think it's not the case. Sometimes in the short stories, I find three of them translated by somebody and then the next three translated by somebody else. I ask the publishers why and they say "Well she did three and then we didn't think she was good enough so we gave them to somebody else". But all I can do is trust. I usually trust the publisher, if not out of sensitivity, out of sales.

But sometimes there are just things you can say in one language and you can't say in the other. And sometimes the translators phone up. The French translator will phone up and say "What do you mean by this?" And sometimes the habits or the landscape are strange to the translator.

Florence BERNARD: I translated the two first collections of short stories. The two little books.

AM: What is your last name?

FB: Bernard.

AM: Oh, I see! You are like someone from a novel. I talked to you on the phone but I never saw you.

FB: In fact I was much younger when I translated your short stories. I think I was very shy to talk to you because I have so much admiration for your work.

AM: But you won a prize for that?

FB: Yes. And your first one "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" was also published. A French publisher bought my translation.

AM: You phoned me up once about the "poultice made of cobwebs"! You do very good work. I am very glad to meet you.

LC (to Florence Bernard): How did you translate the two titles?

FB: I first translated three short stories of the first collection for my MA thesis, and, at first I translated 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood' by 'Cet amer héritage au goût de sang'. This was the title for the MA thesis and then after that when I talked to the publisher, he wanted to have a shorter title, so we just stayed with 'Cet amer héritage', which is a

good title I think. In fact I have it here,...oh, no, 'Cet héritage au goût de sel', for the first one, and then for the other one, 'Les Hirondelles font le printemps', because it is impossible to translate exactly... well that's one of the things the other publisher from Montreal told me. He said I was too close to the English language in the titles.

LC: Does the term 'salt-gift' exist?

AM: No, this is my idea. But I thought with 'salt' because it deals with that kind of place, 'lost salt gift of blood', and blood has salt in it obviously, and I liked salt because it is one of those condiments when little bits make things better and too much make things worse, so it is a balance. And then in that story, the gift is ambiguous. It's about the birth of a child born out of wedlock, which is not a good idea in the eyes of some, but as the child grows, the child is seen as a gift by others, so it has got that ambiguity to it.

MS: When you compose your stories, do you think about story sequences?

AM: No.

MS: If not, what care do you take with the placing of the stories when you publish a volume? Is it important to have them in a certain order?

AM: In those early two volumes they were placed in certain orders.

MS: The first three in Island are about boys growing up.

AM: Yes, those three in *Island* are placed in chronological order.

MS: From when they were written?

AM: Yes. When you are writing stories, when you are in the immediacy of the story, you obviously can't see down the road. So I just write maybe one a year for a long time and then put them together.

LC: He mentioned the stories about children growing up, those 'coming of age' stories in Island. Is there something particular about that life event that you wanted to deal with in your stories?

AML: I think that one of the interesting things about being a child and maybe about being an adolescent is that a lot of things happen to you for the first time. So, these first time experiences that happened to you when you were young will never happen again with the same kind of emotional intensity.

I think that one other thing that happens when you move from childhood to adulthood is there is a while, when you are a child, that you think that your parents can do everything. If your doll is broken or your wagon doesn't work, you can take it to your mother and your father and they will have answers to everything. But then when you move, however we do this, from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, you realize that adults can't do everything and now you are one of them and there is no one to run to, because this is what it means to be an adult. So I was interested in that kind of moment.

JS: In 'Winter Dog' you say that memory is more real than reality.

AM: Well, I think we are around reality all the time. And a lot of it is boring, we can't stand it. But we remember emotional highs and emotional lows. And they have an emotional hold on us that the dull reality does not have. You will remember something like those images of the dog -- that man in 'Winter Dog' sort of says "I remember this". So that emotional memory is stronger than having, say, crepes for dinner, though I know that's reality.

HV: There is a tremendous empathy between the writing voice and the character in your stories. Is it the only way you want to write? You seem not to want to take any distance from your characters.

AM: That's a triumph of technique! I like to have empathy with the characters. Because it's too easy just to load people down with bad characteristics so I say: "What I'm going to do, even if people do bad things, is to try to understand them." I think in that way, you perhaps have more insight into the human condition, or the way people in certain places are trying to live. So I'm glad to have empathy with them, I like them all.

Q: But you kill them off!

AM: I don't kill them all off! We all are going to be killed off! It is what I said, don't be surprised if you die one day, it's going to happen. People that we love leave us, we leave them. I don't think this is a breakthrough. At 66 I'm aware of Time's winged chariot drawing near, more so than when I was 46 or 26. But even at 26, I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be eternal, an eternal flame.

Q: Do you know how you will end a story in advance?

AM: Yes. Yes, I do. I write the conclusion when I'm half way through. And I work really hard on a conclusion when I'm half way through because I say: "This is going to be the last thing that I say to the reader and it'd better be good or as good as I can make it". And so the last lines of nearly all the stories I thought about. The last line of 'The Boat': "There was not much left of my father, physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair." And the last line of 'Vision': "And forever difficult to see and understand the tangled twisted strands of love." Last line of the novel: "All of us are better when we're loved." I say: "This is what I am going to say and this is going to be my last paragraph or my last image." And I work towards that, the way the boat works towards the lighthouse. I see that as my destination. I start and when I'm half way through, if it is going well, I say "Now, what's going to happen in the final scene". She is going to leave the island, the father is going to be washed over, there is going to be this resolution to what we see and what we don't see or what we missed in 'Vision'. And 'In The Fall', "I think that I will find David that perhaps he may understand." This is the older boy who suddenly realizes what it is like to be an adult and that the parents are not monsters to sell the horse as the little brother thinks they are because he loves the horse. So there will be that, if not resolution, a kind of understanding.

To be able to work that way you have to be really sure of yourself, you have to say: "All right, this is my story about vision, this is my story about death, this is my story about cliché. This is going to involve this kind of boy, this kind of man and woman, this kind of event, and then it is going to end like this with this scene, and the scene is going to be outside in the wind and the rain or the scene is going to be at night with the boat leaving". So that's the way I work.

MS: It's interesting when you say that you write the end about half way through. Is that because it is only half way that you really know what the end is going to be?

AM: When you're writing, you feed off what you've written and then you say "Now it's time to think about the end". And it nearly always works out fine for me. It keeps you thinking all the time, thinking of the destination.

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